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COUNT MORIN
DEPUTY

COUNT MORIN D E P U T Y

By ANATOLE FRANCE

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I WAS still but a sort of overgrown schoolboy when Fontanet suddenly emerged into consequence by reason of his law degree, his precocious beard and his advanced opinions. It was in 1868. He lectured to members of the Junior Bar and even contributed satirical articles to the little Reviews of the Latin Quarter. While he was making himself known, his father was becoming a celebrity. That was an ad-

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vantage of which my friend availed himself with the delightful alacrity that never forsook him. Though he saw me less often than formerly, his friendliness towards me suffered no abatement. For this I was greatly beholden to him. One morning we had the pleasure of walking through the Jardin du Luxembourg together. It was springtime, the sky was clear. The light that shone through the tender green of the fresh foliage was soft and pleasant to the eye. There was a sense of gladness in the air and I would fain have taken Love for my theme. But, while the sparrows were twittering among the leaves and a pigeon rested with folded wing upon the shoulder of a statue, Fontanet held forth to me as follows:

“I have got a piece of good news for you: M. Veulet is about to enter on an active political career. We have at

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length prevailed on him to take this step. At the next election he will stand as an independent candidate for one of the districts in the department of the Seine-et-Marne. He is looking out for some one to act as his private secretary during the electoral campaign. It occurred to me that the position might suit you."

"I don't know," I answered, "whether I should be equal to the work."

"Oh," replied Fontanet, with that alluring grace which constitutes his great attraction, "if the position were one that required decision, initiative, energy, I should never have thought of suggesting you. I know you through and through and I realize that, though at bottom you are intelligent enough, you've no dash, no spontaneity about you."

"No," said I, "I have not."

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"You lack quick-wittedness," he added.

"Quite right," I answered, "I do."

"You are a little heavy," he went on, "a little sleepy. And it would be wrong to judge you by appearances as people usually do. But don't be afraid. When you are with M. Veulet, your work will be all cut and dried. You will only have to stick at it a bit."

Observing that, despite his efforts to reassure me, I was still rather inclined to hesitate, he added:

"Laisse-toi faire—Do as they ask you. It would smarten you up tremendously."

I have never experienced the smallest desire to be smartened up, but "*laisser faire*"—*that* always had an attractive sound about it. So "*laisser faire*" carried the day and it was arranged that I should go to the theatre that very

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night; that, on my arrival there, I should proceed straight up to Madame Fontanet's box, where, in addition to that estimable lady, I should find M. Fontanet senior, a president of the Bar, who would himself introduce me to M. Veulet.

"So," said I to Fontanet in order to get as much information as I could on the subject that was uppermost in my mind, "M. Veulet is really a man of note?"

"Oh," answered Fontanet, in a tone of conviction, "he's great!"

"I can quite believe it," I replied, for I had heard the same thing said about a number of people. "But what is he specially great at?"

With a shrug of his shoulders Fontanet told me I was asking ridiculous questions. That, too, I readily believed. My adverse critics have always commanded my respect.

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Nevertheless he was good enough to add that M. Veulet had devoted his youth to the abolition of slavery.

“He has served,” he said, “as a volunteer in both hemispheres. He fought in Peru under General Pezet against the Spaniards. He was at Pittsburg and the Siege of Corinth. He fought against the slave party under General Sherman in Liberia and under Stephen Allen Benson against the niggers in Palm Island. He fought at Warsaw under Langiewicz beside Mlle. Pustowoitoff; in the Caucasus under Schamyl against the Russians, and single-handed against all comers on board a slave ship.”

“Nothing could be finer,” I exclaimed.

“Nothing save the gift of oratory,” answered Fontanet.

In the evening I duly attended at the Théâtre Français. There I found M.

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Fontanet senior, who, between the acts, introduced me to M. Veulet in front of Voltaire's statue. M. Veulet was standing amidst a group of friends. On hearing my name he vouchsafed me a nod.

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He thought to display his benevolence: I was conscious only of his superiority. I was so overcome that I went and hid myself behind his auditors. From there I contemplated him. He somehow suggested a river, and I took him to be rather more than fifty years of age.

He was tallish and held his head erect. His beard conveyed the idea of genius and virtue, though it was really rather difficult at first to decide which of these impressions was the stronger. His skull was remarkable, but not on account of its size. It was, on the contrary, rather small, and pointed; but it looked so bare, so yellow and so shiny that, at the sight of it, one fell to thinking of the attrition it had so generously undergone in all the wars, expeditions and hardships which its owner had been through in the distant lands. It reflected the light so powerfully that it seemed all

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aglow, and one might be forgiven for doubting whether it was the gas jets which illumined it or whether there still played about it a few glorious rays from the scorching sun that had beaten down on this soldier-explorer in climes beyond the seas. The lines that wrinkled his forehead, though less becoming than one might have wished, were merged in the dazzling radiance of the cranium. The eyes were small and grey; but what imparted an extraordinary grandeur to the whole countenance was the nose. By its astounding length it gave rise to all manner of vast and vague ideas. It was a nose that descended straight down between a pair of hollow cheeks till it reached a long white beard which adorned the whole physiognomy with that aspect of majestic repose which characterizes the Kings of antique legends and the bison of the Missouri.

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You may readily suppose that such a man presented a venerable appearance. His tall frame, spare yet robust, rested on two feet which, in another, might possibly have seemed flat, but which were encased in a pair of splendid warrior-like boots; truly heroic foot-gear.

As I listened, I heard him saying:

“Not a day passes but I receive newspapers from every country in the world, Albania, Herzegovina, Croatia, Bosnia, Transylvania, Barbary, Labrador, Maharashtra, and when I happen to notice among the general news that a miller belonging to Marburg has been drowned in the Drave or that a poor Sudra of Catmandou has been eaten by a tiger, my eyes fill with tears and I feel as though I were father, mother, wife and children all in one to these unhappy creatures.”

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At this point the bell went and interrupted his discourse.

“How splendid!” I murmured to myself as I returned to my seat.

Next day I was M. Veulet’s secretary.

Shortly afterwards I was copying some addresses out of the directory when my worthy chief summoned me to his room. Hardly had I got inside the door when he began to give vent to raucous groans accompanied by a hideous contraction of all the muscles of his face. I was horribly scared.

“It’s all right,” he said kindly, seeing my alarm. “It’s only rheumatics, the result of spending fourteen hours in a marsh in the Ukraine. It’s complicated at the present moment with neuralgic pains caused by a bullet that hit me in the head when riding alone through a forest in Texas. But please don’t worry about it. I don’t.”

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And indeed he seemed not to suffer the least inconvenience from pains which a moment before had made him cry out as if he were on the rack.

“My young friend,” said he, “you will soon be able to be of service to me. I have not yet said anything to you on the question of salary. It is both equitable and necessary that all work should have its reward. You’ve only got to say the word, just one word, and I will give you any amount you care to name. But if you take my advice you will leave the whole thing to me. I promise you, you’ll have no cause to regret it.”

At those words I realized beyond any shadow of doubt that, unless I was a fool to myself, the most short-sighted and thick-headed creature that ever was, in short a colossal dunderhead, I had just got to put aside all idea of remuneration. I did so with a wave of the hand.

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I had immediate occasion to congratulate myself on taking this course, for M. Veulet rewarded me with a smile full of promise which assured me that my fortune was made. Then he slowly unbuttoned his frock-coat, laid his hand on his heart, drew forth a cigar which was reposing upon it and offered it to me. It was a little cigar of quite an ordinary brand. But how true it is that the value of every gift depends upon the manner in which it is bestowed. M. Veulet proffered me this cigar with a gesture of such sweeping magnificence that I recognized at once that he was awarding me a cigar of honour.

From that day onwards we devoted all our time and energies to our electoral area in the department of the Seine-et-Marne. To be quite frank, we hardly knew anything about it. M. Veulet, who had drunk of the waters of nearly

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every river in the world, had never stayed his steps by the banks of the Marne. He deputed to me the task of studying the needs of the people whose votes we were about to canvass. I looked up the gazeteers and discovered that their occupations were manufacturing and agricultural. From this I inferred that they had need of sun and rain and that they required peace. My employer did not have it in his power to control the winds which bring the clouds together and scatter them again, but he was one of those fortunate beings who know how to hold out the symbolical olive branch to a grateful proletariat. He often alluded to the Brotherhood of Nations; "Take a flute," he said, "and go and play upon it in the woods; all creatures will draw near to you to listen; in the same way there is a harmony that draws the nations together;



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'tis to this harmony that we must give ear." And I looked with admiration on this old warrior covered with scars, who longed for the peace of the world. He inscribed as watchwords on his election address:

"No more conscription; no more standing armies!"

Captious critics might perhaps have inquired by what process M. Veulet proposed to disarm our neighbours simultaneously with ourselves. But I was not a captious critic and my spirit was fulfilled of enthusiasm and hope.

While I was engaged in studying the needs of our constituents, M. Veulet was conferring with several advocates who formed a sort of Committee, his General Staff as it were. There were a dozen or fourteen of them who used to come and enlighten M. Veulet on certain matters appertaining to admin-

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istrative jurisprudence. We had indeed a redoubtable official candidate against us; a man whose mandate, which had been several times renewed, and whose personal position rendered him a powerful opponent, to wit Comte Morin.

I had the pleasure of seeing among



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them M. Fontanet senior, who looked somewhat like a Roman with his bushy eyebrows, heavy cheeks and square chin. As he passed by he waved me a friendly greeting with his finger-tips, an act of condescension that flattered me the more because he was closely surrounded by a throng of confrères whose attention he was monopolizing. He certainly did not abuse the interest which attached to his pronouncements, for he never uttered more than four or five sentences at any one meeting; and of those he was accustomed to devote one to lauding the vanished glories of the Comédie-Française and expatiating on the talents and charms of the delicious Madame Allan.

“You never knew her, you fellows” he was wont to say to his young confrères.

And they would go away declaring

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“Fontanet is an artist to his fingertips.”

That caused me to look at his nails. They were square and embedded in his fingers, which were short and fat. His son frequently accompanied him. On each occasion he would ask me whether I was smartening up. That rather got on my nerves but he had a pleasant way of calling me “my lad” which made me quite happy. Then he would proceed to impart information.

“Well, that Comte Morin of yours has been up to some nice games. He has presented a banner to the Horticultural Association. What a cynical old humbug!”

I found it necessary to ask Fontanet to explain, and I did not give rein to my indignation until after I understood that this gift of a banner constituted a singularly unprincipled electioneering manœuvre.

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However, our affairs were going on very satisfactorily. A group of electors requested M. Veulet in flattering terms to stand as their candidate.

M. Veulet replied as follows:

“It was my fondest hope to spend the remainder of my days in studious retirement. You have decided otherwise. I hasten to respond to the appeal of the good folk who honour me with their confidence. There are grave moments in the political life of a country when to stand aside would be to desert her in her hour of need. You may count upon me.”

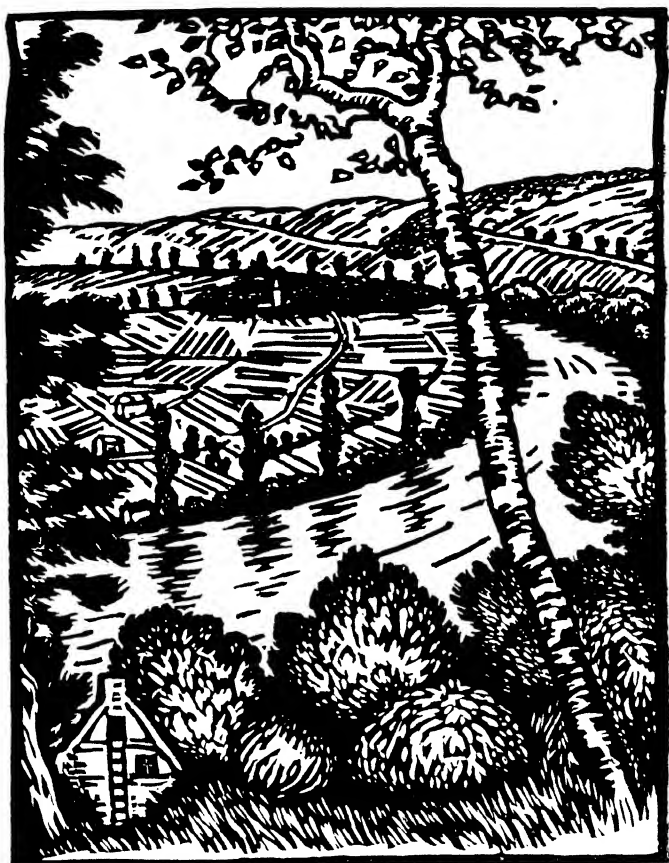
The battle was joined. We had to carry on the fight. M. Veulet sent me to the chief town of the constituency as sub-editor of the *Inaepenaent*, the editor-in-chief of which was M. Saint-Florentin.

I murmured as I stepped into the

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railway carriage: "May I render good service to my dear, dear master and may I learn the needs of the inhabitants of the —th electoral division of the department of the Seine-et-Marne."

As the train drew near my destination, I looked out of the carriage window. The silver waters of the river were gliding on between the willows, winding in gracious curves till they vanished from sight; but, long after the stream had been lost to view, you could divine its meanderings by the line of poplars which bordered it. A steeple and two towers, rising amid the trees, indicated the site of the town. Soon I perceived the boulevards and the beginning of the houses. The place seemed invested with an atmosphere of tranquil happiness. There it lay, small and gem-like beneath an azure sky in which light, fleecy clouds floated motionless. The sight of



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it suggested repose and homely delights. Nevertheless I was going there to introduce political discord.

I inquired my way to the *Independent*. It was close to the station, in a little, low house covered with wistaria.



I found M. Saint-Florentin in his office. He had taken off his coat and waistcoat and he was writing. He was a giant, and

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a giant of the most hirsute description I had ever encountered. He was as swarthy as a nigger. Every time he moved there was a sound as of rustling horsehair, and he had a sort of wild-beast scent about him. He did not cease writing; puffing and blowing, his chest bared to the air, he went on till he had finished his article. Not until then did he inquire of me what my business was. When I told him that M. Veulet had appointed me his sub-editor, he answered: "Quite so," and mopped his forehead. I asked him what my duties would be.

"Always the same old thing," was his reply.

I had to make a frank avowal of my complete ignorance of everything pertaining to journalism. So far from this telling against me, the confession called forth a sudden manifestation of gener-

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osity. He smiled upon me, extended his hand and asked me to dine with him and his family.

He gave me his address and added:

“When you get there, ask for M. Planchonnet. That is my real name. Away from the office here we drop Saint-Florentin. It’s Planchonnet out of business hours.”

I make several attempts to lead the conversation round to the subject of M. Veulet’s candidature, in which I was so greatly interested. He seemed, however, to regard the matter with marked coldness.

Nevertheless there was no coldness about his article. I read it that evening. What fiery eloquence! The banner presented to the Horticultural Association was the text of his fulminations. How forcibly did my editor-in-chief denounce such corrupt practices. He

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passed alternately from wrath to irony, from irony to wrath. Comte Morin was directly aimed at. The article pictured him as a redoubtable, resourceful and unprincipled antagonist, having recourse to subterranean manœuvres and exhibiting tireless energy, underhand activity, an ambition and a fanaticism that attained the proportions of genius.

“Well, anyhow,” I said as I folded up the paper, “it’s well to know something of the adversary.”

As I had an hour to spend before going to my editor’s house in response to his invitation, I went for a stroll in a little wood a few hundred yards out of the town. It was a semi-wild cluster of hornbeams, maples, ash, limes and lilacs, a little bouquet that sang in the breeze. I thought it charming. I fell in love with it and I made up my mind to get to know every tree in it, to seek

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out its lowliest plants, its coronillas and saxifrages, and to see whether there was not some Solomon's seal to be found growing in the shade of the big trees. I had already wandered through it in two or three different directions, when my eye lighted on an old man sitting on a seat on which he had deposited his hat, his handkerchief and two or three bottles of medicine.

His face was long and pallid, a few wisps of grey hair hung over his forehead, his eyes were sad and his mouth drooped mournfully. He had a skipping rope in his hand and was looking fixedly at a little girl of five who was sticking twigs into the sandy bed of a dried-up rivulet. The child's dress was of lace. Every now and then she would gaze up at the old man with her big dark-rimmed eyes. When she had finished arranging her little garden she smiled

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with her pale lips. Then I saw the old man brush aside a tear as he turned his face away. I concealed myself in order to observe him the more closely, and I perceived that he was afflicted with illness rather than with age. He was elegantly dressed, but his movements were strained and painful. Clearly paralysis had affected his limbs and laid to sleep in his brain everything save his love for this little sick child who was playing in the sand beside him.

Though there was nothing extraordinary about this encounter, it made a deep and painful impression upon me. What I thought I read in the expression of this sad and suffering countenance seemed to teach me how vain and futile are our quarrels and our ambitions in the face of Destiny. "That man," said I to myself, "has no part in our disputes. Electors have no interest for him



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and suffering which exalts him far above us vouchsafes him a terrible exemption from our petty trials and vexations.”

Pondering these things in my mind, I found myself at the abode of my editor. I discovered him in his drawing-room with two or three children on his knees and some more on his shoulders; he even had some in his pockets. They were shouting “Papa” at him and tugging at his beard. He was a different man. He had on a new frock-coat and a white shirt, and he smelt of lavender. But what altered the man beyond recognition was his air of kindliness and contentment. The room was full of flowers and as gay as he. .

A woman now entered. She was pale and delicate looking, but, though her figure was ruined, her pale gold hair and eyes of watchet blue gave her a not unprepossessing appearance.

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“Let me introduce you to Madame Planchonnet,” he said.

He seemed proud of his wife and, really, she was very good to look upon; I should never have thought that a man made after the fashion of my editor-in-chief would have been able to present so charming a spouse.

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Her style of dress delighted me. It was light in colour and texture, but that is all I can tell you about it. In those days I was quite unable to analyse a woman's dress or clearly to distinguish her raiment from her person. I can do so now and I derive no pleasure from the skill. Madame Planchonnet shed her charm around her and I perceived that the house reflected the orderliness of her mind and the graciousness of her thoughts. Not that it had any attractiveness in itself with its ungainly woodwork and the great, clumsy beams that stretched across the ceilings. Nor was it expensively furnished for, naturally, luxurious and abundant furniture was hardly to be expected in the household of a wandering journalist like my editor-in-chief. But draperies daintily disposed, some artistic pottery and a few flowers and leaf sprays made a pleasant

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ensemble for the eye to rest upon. The children (of whom I now perceived there were but five) were big and rough and florid, though fine enough specimens of their kind. Their bare arms and legs formed about their sire a sort of lavish framework of flesh, softened by a golden down, and they all fell to staring at me in silence like so many little wild things. Madame Planchonnet apologized for their rudeness.

“We never stop long in one place and they don’t have time to become acquainted with anyone. They are little savages; they know nothing. How can they be expected to learn, when we move into fresh rooms every six months? Henri, the eldest, is over eleven. He doesn’t know a word of his catechism yet, and how in the world we are to get him to make his first communion I don’t know. Your arm, Monsieur.”

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The dinner was abundant. A young country wench, acting under the vigilant control of Madame Planchonnet, kept bringing in dish after dish of game and poultry which my host, a napkin



tucked under his chin, a three pronged fork in one hand and a carving-knife with a stag-horn handle in the other, ordered to be placed before him, displaying all his white teeth and rolling

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terrifying eyes in the midst of his hairy visage. His nostrils dilated at the savoury odour of the viands. Sticking out his elbows, he carved away at his poultry and game, giving thumping platefuls to his children, his wife and his guest, and displaying a prodigious love of eating. His aspect was terrible, contented and kind. He delivered himself of perfectly harmless observations accompanied with gusts of frightful laughter. But it was when pouring out the wine that he manifested, in all their luxuriant magnificence, the characteristics of the good-humoured ogre. Reaching down with his huge arms and without bending his body, he would pull up by the neck one after another of the many bottles that stood ranged at his feet and poured out bumpers for his wife, who protested in vain, for his children, who had already

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fallen asleep with one cheek in their plate, and for me, hapless one! who gulped down, without giving myself time to taste it, red wine, pink wine, white wine, amber wine and golden wine whose age and vintage he proclaimed in ringing, jovial tones. We thus emptied a number of bottles of divers brands; how many I haven't a notion. After that I expressed to my hostess sentiments at once exalted and tender. All that was heroic and amorous in my heart came thronging to my lips. I raised the conversation to the region of the sublime; but I experienced a very real difficulty in maintaining it at that level, because, although Monsieur Planchonnet nodded approval of my most transcendent flights, he did not follow them up, but kept firing off observations concerning the gathering and preparation of edible fungi or some

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other culinary topic. He carried a complete cookery book in his head and a quite useful gastronomical survey of France. Now and then he told stories illustrating the precocity of his offspring.

With the dessert came the consciousness that I loved Madame Planchonnet. So pure and so generous was this passion that, far from smothering it in my bosom, I gave it overt expression in lingering looks and philosophic disquisitions. I unfolded my views on Life and Death. I had still much to say to Madame Planchonnet when she left us to put the children to bed. They had all fallen sound to sleep in their chairs with their legs up in the air. Her departure left me grave and thoughtful, seated opposite Planchonnet who went on everlastingly pouring out liqueurs. I prayed that he might have a noble soul,

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and I one nobler still, in order that
Madame Planchonnet might be loved
by two men worthy of her. Therefore
I resolved to sound the heart of Plan-
chonnet.

“Monsieur Planchonnet,” I said,
“that was a powerful article you wrote
showing up Comte Morin’s man-
œuvres.”

“Oh, you mean the bit of flap-
doodle in this morning’s issue!”

“Flap-doodle,” said I to myself.
“H’m, that must be a technical or pro-
fessional expression.”

“Monsieur Planchonnet,” I con-
tinued, “what sort of a man is this
Comte Morin?”

“Don’t know him; never saw him.
They say he’s a pretty good-natured
old dodderer.”

Observing a look of surprise on my
face, he added:

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“I don’t know anyone here. Three months ago I was still at Gap. It was Veulet’s committee who asked me if I would like to come here and give Morin a fall. And here I am. What about a drop of anisette, eh?”

An immense desire to love filled my bosom. I began to feel a great affection for Planchonnet. I was familiar, interested and confidential; above all confidential.

At length, seeing that he was dropping off into a doze, I got up, wished him good night and expressed a desire to pay my respects to Madame Planchonnet.

That, he gave me to understand, I could not do because she was in bed. I said how sorry I was and looked about for my hat, which I had much ado to find. Planchonnet came with me to the top of the stairs and imparted, concern-

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ing the manner of holding on to the balusters and negotiating the stairs, advice not commonly bestowed on departing guests. But the staircase was apparently a difficult one, for I sat down on it at least twice. Planchonnet asked me whether I could get back to my hotel. I considered the question offen-

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sive. I told him I was certain I should find it all right; wherein I spoke rashly, for I spent half the night looking for it, although it was in the same street as my host's house. During my search I noted how difficult it occasionally is not to put both feet in the gutter at once. The most fantastic ideas were crowding pell-mell into my head and, though I had made up my mind to perform forthwith some striking deed before the very eyes of Madame Planchonnet, I could not decide in my own mind what form and nature that deed was to take.

When I awoke next day, the sun was high in the heavens. My tongue was parched, my skin burning hot. These symptoms made it quite clear to me that I had been abominably drunk the night before. But what worried me most was that I could not remember



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what I had said to Madame Planchonnet during dinner. As I had good grounds for thinking it was a lot of nonsense, I had not the courage to put in another appearance at the *Independent*.

With my heart filled with shame and despondency, I went and lay me down in my little wood and there, all alone, lying flat on the grass, my eyes gazing heavenwards and watching the silvery leaves of a young poplar a-sparkle in the breeze, I received the mute consolations of nature and forgave myself for my shortcomings.

I conceived the hope that Madame Planchonnet would make allowance for my youth and that I had not irrevocably forfeited the sympathetic regard of the delicate soul which I had discerned in her deep blue eyes. This hope was the greatest comfort to me and I should

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have inclined to unqualified optimism
if Madame Planchonnet's figure had
been as pretty as her eyes.

I was thus endeavouring to adjust
my relations with life, when I heard a
child crying. I went in the direction
of the sound and saw the little invalid
girl I had encountered the day before.
While she wept, the same old man who
was with her on the former occasion,



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was gazing up in despair at the topmost branches of a tall elm. Blank dismay was depicted on his countenance. His poor old arms were beating the air and his knees were trembling. He was certainly the victim of a dilemma with which it was beyond his power to cope.

"There . . there . . there . . ." he kept saying.

On my offering to do what I could to assist him, he explained in hesitating and embarrassed tones that the ball with which his little girl had been playing had lodged in a tree and that the walking stick he had thrown up to bring it down had also got entangled in the branches. He was at his wit's end.

The little girl, ceasing to cry, turned towards me. I looked at them both and saw that they resembled each other. Their features were large and finely chiselled and, beneath the imprint of

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suffering, retained a hint of something
at once attractive and rare.

The first thing to be done was to help them. I looked about to see if I could discover the branches on which the stick and the ball had caught.

"There . . there . . there . ." the old man kept repeating, stretching forth a palsied arm which, refusing obedience to its owner, pointed tremulously in all directions. The effort put him in a bath of perspiration.

I discovered by myself what I was looking for, and, by throwing a stone up into the tree, I soon managed to bring down the ball. The old man saw it fall with childish glee.

The walking stick, which was hardly visible from below, was not to be got at by means of a stone, so I decided to climb the tree. With wandering words and wandering wits the old man begged

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and prayed that I would do nothing of the sort. It was enough, he said, that the little girl had recovered her ball and had ceased to cry. But I was conscious of a feeling of indomitable energy. It was the first effect of my love for Madame Planchonnet. I swung up from branch to branch with an agility of which I never dreamt myself the possessor and seized hold of the stick. I then observed that it was adorned with a gold knob and a ring of turquoise. I handed it to the old man and then hurried away in order to spare him the trouble of thanking me a second time. My ideas had changed colour. I went back with a stout heart to the office of the *Independent*.

There I found Planchonnet half stripped, sweating, puffing and blowing, his eyes starting from his head, his tongue out and his beard dripping with

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foaming beer. Three empty tankards
were ranged about him. His pen grasped
firmly in his clenched fist, he was writ-
ing a fresh article on the doings of
Comte Morin and it was obvious from
the way he addressed himself to the task
that he had a big thing on hand. I my-
self carried the sheets to the composing
room as he completed them.

It was in truth a big thing. This time



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it had to do with umbrellas presented by Comte Morin to the market dames. This act alone roused Planchonnet's indignation to such a pitch that his previous article, which I had thought so violent, seemed weak and timid in comparison. I complimented him on the production. He seemed flattered and replied:

"I'll tell you about it. As I was going through the market this morning to buy a melon—for when it's a case of choosing a melon or a pheasant women are absolutely useless: only a man is any good at buying fruit and game—in passing along the stalls, I observed that the women had all got brand-new red umbrellas. I remarked on the fact to a butter-woman who told me that, from time immemorial, the 'Big House' had always presented the market women, at this time of the year,

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with new umbrellas. Well the 'Big House' means Comte Morin. Comte Morin you know has a family estate here. So I said 'My good woman, without knowing it you have done my article for me.'"

Then he plucked me by the sleeve:
"Come home with me and have a bit of dinner; we'll eat up the scraps."

I refused, not wishing to become too intimate with my editor-in-chief. I paid but one more visit to Madame Planchonnet who, seated with a bunch of wild flowers beside her, was sewing a patch on the seat of her eldest boy's knickerbockers. Our conversation was characterized by extreme reserve and, if since then I continued to love Madame Planchonnet, it was a sentiment that only came to me by moonlight, the pale beams of which she closely resembled.



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I soon learned my job and I worked at it conscientiously. I spent the whole day in cutting paragraphs out of the newspapers, correcting proofs and writing up M. Veulet.

As for Comte Morin, I gave him no quarter, him or his opinions.

I seldom went out. One day, however, I took a stroll along the river,



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which mirrors in its blue waters the willows and the white houses on its banks. That day I went farther into the country than I had been before and I found myself at length in front of some park gates.

Half-way up the hill which rose gently from the road, stood a big country-house built in Empire style with a columned portico. At that moment the gates opened and there, before me, was my unknown friend, the paralytic whom I had encountered in the little wood. Again he was accompanied by his little girl, but this time she was not walking. She was lying full length in a perambulator which was wheeled by a governess. It was painful to see her poor little white face lying there on an embroidered pillow in the shadow of the lowered hood. She looked like one of those little

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waxen martyrs adorned with silver filigree, on whose wounds and jewels the nuns of Spain love to gaze and meditate in the solitude of their cells.

The old man was elegantly dressed. His face which had been "made up" was all smeared with tears. He came towards me with little jerky steps, took me by the hand and led me towards his little girl.

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“You don’t think she’s changed since you last saw her? You don’t think so, now, do you?” he asked in a sort of wheedling, childish tone. “It was the day she threw her—er—her ball into a, into a—er—into a tree. She is my daughter. Don’t you think she looks better?”

We walked along together.

I did my best to comfort the poor man; but I was feeling anything but cheerful myself. As we relapsed into silence the little sufferer called out:

“Mamma! Mamma! I want to see Mamma!”

Her father shuddered in every limb and said nothing.

“I want to see Mamma,” the child repeated, weeping.

Then the father, raising his eyes, stretched forth both his arms as if to call Heaven to witness how unmerited were his sufferings.

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The perambulator which we were following in silence came to a halt in a little pine wood. The governess lowered the hood and we looked at the child. She seemed to be afraid of something that was invisible to us. I endeavoured to amuse her with flowers and songs. I succeeded. A little air and a little distraction almost put new life into her. She lifted her head and, when an hour had gone by, her cheeks were almost rosy.

When it grew chilly and she had to be taken back to the house, her father pressed my hand and stammered out:

“I thank you, Monsieur. I wish I could be of some service to you. I am Comte Morin.”

Comte Morin! I was thunderstruck.

It was now my turn to stammer.

“Comte Morin,” I said, “the Parliamentary candidate?”

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“Hush, hush,” said he, “the—er—the—er—the prefect makes a great deal of my candidature. He—er—says—er—er that I am the—er—only candidate agreeable to the Government—er—that—er—has any chance of success. But I absolutely refuse . . . to stand. I cannot and I will not leave this child. The—er—er—the Emperor will understand that I cannot. This child has no one . . . you . . . understand . . . she has no one. Her—er—er—mother

I would have made a clean breast then and there of all the wrongs I had done him, but I did not deem him strong enough to listen to such a confession.

M. Veulet was elected. He beat Comte Morin by three hundred and sixty-two votes. When the election was over, I returned to Paris. I had been there about three weeks when I had a visit from Fontanet.

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“Well, my lad,” he said, “so you’ve been putting your foot in it again, have you? There are some nice stories going round about you. As for me, I don’t know how much is true and how much lies. I know you. We were old chums, and I know perfectly well that you don’t mean any harm. But, between ourselves, you’ve made a mistake, a big mistake. That’s not the way to make a start in life.”

I begged him to explain himself. He shrugged his shoulders with an assurance that quite frightened me.

“You know quite well what I mean. A man can’t be such a duffer as that. Fancy! Sent to back up M. Veulet, you go and start intriguing with his opponent.”

I strongly protested.

“Oh!” said Fontanet. “But Veulet has told me all about it. You *have* made

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a mess of it. I can understand that a case might arise when a man might leave his own party and join another (he had an understanding soul had my friend Fontanet) but, even so, there are limits to observe and one ought to have some sort of object. You are a duffer. You do not see that the Empire is over and done with; you never do see anything. You didn't see that this Comte Morin of yours is merely an old schemer (my friend Fontanet, let me tell you, always saw everything). The best part about Morin, my boy, is his wife. When I say *his* wife perhaps that's hardly correct. She leaves him at home while she goes off gallivanting about at all the spas and fashionable watering-places. I got some one to give me an introduction to her at Trouville. I danced with her at a Charity Ball. I don't want to say anything against her;

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it wouldn't be right that I should, but between ourselves she's more than a little bit flighty."

As he said this he stroked his whiskers, put a soft wooing look into his eyes and strutted about with a dandified air. He was a charming fellow, I assure you, my friend Fontanet.

What do you suppose I did as I listened to him. Why, I began to laugh, an attitude that called forth further remonstrances.

"Ah, you're fooling," said Fontanet.

Fooling was I! Ah, no doubt my head was full of merry subjects for reflection. Merry they were with a vengeance! I was thinking about the poor little dying child whom, by the riverside, I had heard calling for her "little mummy" in accents of despair and desolation, for her "little mummy" who was at that very moment dancing with

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my friend Fontanet in some casino. It was because I was thinking of all this that I appeared to be fooling. But Fontanet restored me to a better frame of mind.

“In your own interests,” he said, “you ought to be more careful in your behaviour towards M. Veulet. You have failed to appreciate him. He is a man of great worth, of a piece with his works. Fancy at forty he was still keeping a boarding-house in Montmartre when, plunging into business, he went bankrupt three times, till now, at fifty-two, he is a public man and a candidate for parliament. The man has no end of energy and it is foolish to treat him as you have done.”

“What!” I cried, “M. Veulet kept a boarding-house in Montmartre when he was forty?”

“Didn’t you know that?” answered Fontanet simply.

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What I knew was that he had served as a volunteer in the Old World and the New. That he had fought against the Spaniards in Peru under General Pezet; at Pittsburg and at the Siege of Corinth; in Liberia under General Sherman against the slave party; under Stephen Allen Benson against the blacks in the Palm Islands; at Warsaw under Langiewicz side by side with Mademoiselle Pustlowoïtoff; in the Caucasus under Schamyl against the Russians; and alone against all comers on board a slave ship. That's what I knew.

"Who told you all those yarns?" asked Fontanet disdainfully.

I replied that he himself had, one spring morning in the Jardin du Luxembourg. But he said—and his voice had the ring of truth in it—that I was dreaming and that he was incapable of telling such a lot of taradiddles.

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I didn't argue with him. Fontanet and I had not the same idea of certitude. Philosophic doubt, which has so tormented my spirit, never so much as entered into his.

As he left me, he held out his hand. He was the best of chums.

A few months rolled by. One spring morning, as I was at work at my table, I heard the floor creaking in the most alarming fashion. I turned round expecting to find myself face to face with a bear. Planchonnet stood there before me. He amazed me. I really never imagined him so immense and so uncouth. Nevertheless he had added some new attractions to his get up. His hat was tilted rakishly over one ear, he had a cigar in his mouth and his fingers—what fingers?—were toying with a slender cane.

We had lunch together.

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“Madame Planchonnet,” he informed me, “has just presented me with my sixth. I have come to ask you to stand godfather. The christening celebrations will take place at Rheims and will last a week.”

“At Rheims?”

“Yes, I am editing a government rag there.” Then he began telling me about my “godson.” Born with one tooth in his head, he was an immense and magnificent infant.

We went and took a stroll in the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, where the trees were already beginning to bud and summer dresses to appear. Among the long line of carriages that were making their way towards the Arc de Triomphe, I noticed a handsome victoria in which M. Veulet was reclining like a lion couchant. From afar one could not help seeing and admiring

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his remarkable nose and his august beard.

Protector of the strong, he waved his hand as he passed the tilburys and landaus of the fashionable financiers and smiled some of those gracious and condescending smiles of his.

I was ill advised enough to point him out to Planchonnet, who suddenly let go my arm and rushed after the victoria brandishing his stick and shouting out:

“Thief, liar, humbug. I worked your election and you have not paid me. I’ll break my stick over your head.”

Happily the victoria rolled swiftly away.







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